

# Getting started in facilitation skills

Team days, focus groups, planning sessions – they're all about getting specific outcomes from a finite amount of time. They're about bring groups of people together – people who might not know each other – to work towards a common goal. A skilful facilitator can be the catalyst for consensus and output. The alternative – leaving the group to 'work things out' can lead to disagreement and everyone walking away empty handed.

A common challenge with any group activity is getting *all* participants engaged in the process. Any gathering will collect a mixture of individual interests and priorities. Timing out, blocking discussion, sulking, dominating, not participating, etc. are not unusual. It's situations like these where effective facilitation can make a *critical* difference to the success and final outcomes of a group session.

Facilitation means *making things easier*. A facilitator *should* enable the group they are working with to progress towards their particular outcomes. To be successful, however, the facilitator needs to ensure that every participant has contracted into the process.

## Contracting with your group

The most common reason for challenges within a facilitation is that there is no clear agreement between the facilitator and the group about what they want to achieve and how to go about it. This is where *contracting* comes in – negotiating an agreement with the group. Contracting helps to:

- establish a consensus
- build trust within the group

Contracting relies on three important areas of agreement:

- **Aims** – what the group wants to achieve from the session
- **Ground rules** – how the group will work together, for example, concerning respect for others' views and confidentiality
- **Facilitator's role** – how can the facilitator be most helpful to the group

The key to successful contracting is to do it *consistently* throughout all stages of the facilitation process. Here we're focusing on using contracting at the beginning of a session – a key part to making sure it gets off on the right foot.

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## Getting started

At the beginning of a session participants will all be asking *what's in it for me? Will I be safe here? Is it worth my while being here?* The initial contracting exercise – agreeing aims, groundrules and the facilitator's role – serves to reassure participants that they will be 'safe' and that their time is going to be purposefully spent. And by being transparent about the facilitation process, you minimise the chance of the group feeling manipulated.

### **Agreeing groundrules**

Agreeing groundrules helps to develop shared ownership of the process and the outcomes. In agreeing groundrules, the group are also contracting with one another about what behaviour is acceptable and what is not, e.g. everyone has the right to speak without being interrupted. If this is written down and kept visible, you and the group can keep each other accountable to their agreements.

### **Your role as the facilitator**

Your role as a facilitator is to help the group to achieve its outcomes. Although you are active, it's *their* process – which means they need to have a say in your role.

That doesn't mean that you should take on whatever role they want to give you. For example, if you're facilitating a business planning session you can make it clear that you will enable the process – not write the plan for them!

## Establishing a contract

Below we give an example of a contracting exercise to use at the beginning of a facilitation. It's a non-threatening activity designed to encourage participants to consciously let go of personal or work issues that might get in the way of the session, and actively contract into contributing to the process. You can adapt the questions for different sessions.

Put four flipcharts round the room, with one question on each. Tell the participants they have 15 minutes<sup>1</sup> to either draw or write their answers on each flip.

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<sup>1</sup> Use your judgement to decide how much time to give them.

### **1. What are you leaving behind to be here today?**

This question acknowledges that each participant has a life outside the session, and lets the group know what else is on their mind. By saying what they are *leaving behind* each participant is contracting in their focus and concentration to the group.

### **2. What do you want to take away from today?**

This question allows you to clarify expectations and build group consensus about what the focus will be. You are contracting with *individuals* about what would be a good result for the *group*.

### **3. What are you offering to the group today?**

This question reinforces the idea that the group process is give and take – contributions are needed from everyone to ensure that the session is successful. You are contracting in each person's active participation.

### **4. How would we like to work together today?**

This question lets the group define acceptable behaviours. You can help get people thinking by drawing a few symbols. For example, a clock to trigger thoughts around time keeping, an envelope for confidentiality etc. You are contracting their agreement on group norms and groundrules.

Participants have time to rove around the flipcharts adding their thoughts and talking to others they meet there. After 15 minutes – or however much time you've given, ask the person closest to each flipchart to share with the group what has been written or drawn on it. You can ask for clarification to open up some brief discussions about the points raised.

This exercise steers the group to consensus on how they will work together, what they each individual can contribute and most importantly, what they intend to take away. And your session gets off to a good start with agreed standards of trust and understanding.

If you use contracting throughout a facilitation, you will find people engage in the process more readily and are more likely to follow through on commitments they make during the session.

## Further help

This download focuses specifically on opening sessions. There's a lot more to effective facilitation and =mc's 2-day **Facilitation Skills** programme we will explore practical ways of engaging groups, maintaining momentum and energy for positive outcomes.

## Facilitation Skills

For further information and to make a booking, please visit:

[www.managementcentre.co.uk/fac](http://www.managementcentre.co.uk/fac)

Or call us on **+44 (0) 20 7978 1516**.

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